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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for students preparing for foreign study in Asia and Africa are presented. It is noted that cooperation and peace may be linked to developing successful programs in the non-Western world. The brief time that students spend in the host country enables the student to describe what the foreign values seem to be, but probably without penetrating deeply into why those structures operate as they do. The students are more likely to gain new perspectives on their own ideas and behavior. It is necessary to travel, experience, and study in these parts of the world in order to gain awareness of the people and life. To make the encounter as insightful as possible an orientation is very important. In addition to the obvious topics such as passports, clothing, and health needs, other matters are more subtle, such as the appropriate gifts to take, information about travel on site, receiving/sending mail or phone messages, and warnings peculiar to each country. Orientation should also make students more fully aware of themselves as Americans, since they will stand out as Americans and probably as whites, and will discover a host of stereotypes attached to them. Finally, appropriate coursework in preparation for foreign study is important. The student should be familiar with the history and current politics of the host nation, and the daily habit of reading a newspaper from the host coutnry is valuable. The difficulties of encountering the Kenya culture and constraints felt by American students studying in China are briefly addressed. (SW)

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REDIRECTING STUDENT INTEREST: AFRICA AND ASIA

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

We are gathered to discuss "Redirecting Students Interest: Africa and Asia," and I have been asked to speak on the matter of advising students in anticipation of a sojourn in those parts of the world. I must begin with two caveats. First, there is an incredible and wonderful irony in the fact that we are gathered to discuss redirecting student interest--not to a nation but to two great and complex continents full of diverse cultures and histories: China, with over one billion people; Japan with a population half the size of the United States in an area smaller than California; Africa with its numerous nations and cultures. So many nations and peoples with whose fate we have become irrevocably involved. Part of our difficulty is that we gather to think and talk about two "continents" rather than a people or a nation. I hope you are aware, as I am painfully aware, that giving advice on redirecting student interest and academic programs to Asia and Africa is not simply presumptuous . . . it is absurd. So, caveat one - please take my remarks as cautions, or alerts, or concerns you might want to raise - not as advice about any specific program.

Caveat two. There are many types of programs that American colleges and universities offer. Insights that might apply to one type may not apply to another. Some schools, such as Earlham, take over their own group of students under the leadership of their own faculty and attempt to introduce the group to local instruction and the culture. Other schools introduce their students into the native country's institutions of higher education. Kalamazoo's programs in Africa is an example of the second sort. Yet other schools send students on a consortial program arranged for international students studying in the host country. For example, the CIEE programs in Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing, and the Japan Study Program at Waseda University in Tokyo. Each arrangement demands different preparations and precautions.

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Given such a diversity of nations and programmatic approaches, what can be said?

First, that the prospects for international understanding, cooperation and peace hang on our success in developing successful programs in the non-Western world. The missiles are poised in Europe, but the battles of the last forty years have been fought in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Yesterday I checked my Whole World Handbook and discovered where we place our emphases. Fifteen pages were devoted to listing programs in Western Europe; one page to programs in Eastern Europe; one to programs in the Middle East; two to programs in Latin America; one-half page to programs in Africa; two pages to programs in South Asia (India); and East Asia (mainly Japan).

We must strive to give better balance to understanding the entire globe. There are obvious problems associated with that objective and one of them is what I have just indicated--shooting is going on in some areas where we may want to study. Another is that frequently the European languages we learn in American colleges are not as useful in Africa and in Asia as, obviously, they are in Europe. Nevertheless, with English and French a good deal of Africa and Asia is accessible. In each case, however, it would be useful to learn what Americans consider to be more esoteric languages--Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Swahili just to name some of the more prominent ones.

Second, it is my conviction that any foreign study program we construct for American students will ultimately reveal far more to them about their American values and culture than it will about the host country's culture. Ten weeks or a year is too brief a time to discover very much about the host country. What we discover much more readily is how we adjust to a dramatically different culture; how frustrated we become by that culture's

bureaucracy or pace or stereotypes of Americans; how much we miss our American conveniences; or how much we learn to admire some of their values, their friendship or their generosity. We may learn to describe what their value structures seem to be, but we are not as likely to penetrate deeply into why those structures operate as they do, why those societies make the value choices they do. We are more likely to gain new perspectives on our ideas and behaviour. We may ask whether U.S. foreign aid is as good as we have been led to believe if it makes the receiving nation more dependent on foreign exchange and less on self-sufficiency. We see the effects of our foreign policies, not only what we are told for domestic political consumption in the United States, but as it is felt and perceived by the recipients of our judgments and actions . . . or inactions. To be a World Power presumes great responsibility. We discover how informed our policies are; how sensitively and consistently they are carried out.

Third, and best of all, it is not merely important but necessary to travel, experience, and study in these parts of the world because such an experience brings those people to life in ways that no amount of bookish study can. "The Word becomes flesh." These people enter our bloodstream and consciousness as persons and encounters and observations. We become infected and aware, our senses heightened, our consciences awakened. One student describing the value of a home stay in Kenya wrote:

> . . . you stop generalizing about Kenya. You begin to know small parts of it very intimately and original stereotypes fall apart--like all Kenya men are turkeys--in this family all Kenya men are incredibly nice people. There is a Kenya culture, but it can't be defined in generalizations; it is elusive, a complex set of sound and environmental interactions that are so hard to put in words, but you really get a feel for when you start living among people.

Fourth, to make the encounter as insightful and as healthy as possible an orientation of some sort is very important. The nature of the orientation will, of course, depend upon the nature of the program. Some topics are self-evident: information about passport, baggage, clothing, and health needs. Other matters might be more subtle - such as the appropriate gifts to take, the importance of carrying pictures of home (to share with the natives to communicate a better sense of one's home and family); information about travel on site; how one might receive or send mail or phone messages; what to do about money; and warnings peculiar to each country . . . for instance, that in China cars travel at night without lights . . . or that in a Japanese bath you do not pull the plug. Some of our American women have had difficulties in Japan because they carry with them clear convictions about women's liberation and their right to travel independently. During homestays there have been some awkward encounters between families very concerned about the comings and goings of our students and our students who feel overly protected. It is important to be aware of the different levels of address in Japan, and students will avoid embarrassing situations if they realize that it is best to use colloquial language or cuss-words only with those persons who has taught them the phrase. Students going to Kenya will confront a level of poverty they have probably not encountered before. Not simply beggars in the streets but in the restaurants of Niarobi as well. It is not easy to eat a full meal after a confrontation with a wretched looking person. Probably more unsettling is the almost absolute lack of privacy white American students will discover in Kenya, particularly in the rural areas. Children or host families or the curious will follow them everywhere. Host families will try to fill their every moment. And, of course, there will be loneliness and homesickness and stereotypes of Americans that probably won't fit the student who has taken

the initiative to study in Africa or Asia. It is well to anticipate such difficulties - which may never occur - rather than attempt to cope with them for the first time on the spot.

Orientation should make one more fully aware of oneself as an American. As men are seldom conscious of themselves as male and whites seldom realize they are white, so Americans do not often reflect extensively on the fact of their American-ness. Orientation would do well to bring that identity to the fore . . . students will certainly discover it quickly and with a shock, once they are in Africa or Asia. They will stand out as an American and probably as a white, and they will discover a host of stereotypes attached to them. It is important to be aware of the failings of American society as well as its virtues. One student wrote of her experience in Kenya:

> There is something else that comes to mind as I head homeward and that is the words of Gunter Bach, "Aren't you always glad when your trip is ended to return back here." At the time I thought, "no, that won't be the case. What an ethnocentric view." Well, I'm glad to be going home - not because of the material things: missing running water, hot showers, cheese - but because of the freedom, the choice and control I have over my own life, the responsibility I have over what I do. There are a lot of things wrong with our present government, our capitalistic drives, our exploitive tendencies -- but there is something very, very right about our ability to choose where we're headed, what we'll do and the number of choices open to us. What is needed now, is to spread the ability to choose, the ability to control in part what happens to you - to people outside of the U.S. without spreading the capitalistic ideals of survival for the fittest, you don't get something for nothing, and take what you want because no one's going to give it to you.

Finally, I would urge appropriate course work in preparation for foreign study. One ought to be familiar with the history and current politics of the host nation--or at least have a passing knowledge so that one recognizes or understands names and institutional structures without having to ask

elementary questions. A regular credit course is far more useful than a single lecture on current events because students tend not to pay close attention to a single lecture; they become more engaged by a full course, and such a course also demonstrates their serious interest in learning about the host culture. At the very least, the daily habit of reading a newspaper from the host country should be cultivated.

The risks and rewards of study in Africa and Asia are great. Who should be encouraged to make such a sojourn? Encourage only those who genuinely want to learn. They must possess and demonstrate a great deal of patience and adaptability. As one student said of the Chinese "Patience is not a virtue, it is a way of life." Students must be able to put aside their prejudices and often their judgments. And there is no assurance of success. The 1981 NAFSA report on the American study programs in China is sobering: "For those Americans who do study in China, the experience has proven a complex and often disillusioning one. Despite good will on both sides, students feel they are confronted with seemingly immovable obstacles to serious academic interaction." These include constraints on scholarly research, the quality of teaching, and restrictions on personal freedom and interaction with the Chinese. The report concludes: "The more aggressive and inventive students accomplish perhaps half of what they had intended; others simply dropped out of the academic context early on and did their learning elsewhere." Beside that grim assessment one needs to set a composite of student comments about the program. They advise: "Keep an open mind. It is difficult to meet and make Chinese friends because there is a great deal of government restriction and limitation on contacts with foreigners. Get out early. Don't be afraid to speak. Learn to cope. Make the best of what you are offered. Find the Chinese and filter through

what they want from you in order to get what you want from them. Try to understand why the Chinese do what they do. Suspend judgment. First impressions are often misleading. Avoid cynicism. Be flexible. Be tough and positive and creative." And, the benefits they cite, which was their reward: "You will learn new ways of thinking and discover a wonderful city and its people."

A student to Kenya reflected on the difficulty of encountering that culture:

> We deal in stereotypes. They assuming we have what we don't, asking us to give what we won't and never have given, but that some other American prototype has given, always gives. And we deal with them as if they are asking, even if they don't, because we know that is what they are thinking . . . or so we think. So we put on our masks and become what we aren't, and we - us - and them - create what is inside of the other in our minds and never get beneath the surface of our private stereotypes.
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> And if you are not dealing in stereotypes then you are dealing in politeness; you do what is expected because it is expected, because your hosts are so nice or generous. You are not who you are but who you should be according to them. It is not that I am NOT polite normally, it is just that guest status, beyond the first day, becomes restraining; it leaves me at the surface again. Which is why it felt so good yesterday when I took out my beanbags and went into the dusty yard of Somaal's. I called her and her brothers, and they came out, reluctantly at first; then I juggled and played catch, and laughed with her brothers and her neighbor's children, and the adults looked on and smiled and the children joined in laughter . . . and I was who I am and gave something from inside of me out there in the sun. And that is why, at the table, afterwards, the conversation flowed easily; there were jokes, more laughter, and good food, and everybody felt right.

A few more excerpts from student journals to give a flavor of the reward and insight of sojournes in Africa or Asia:

Of the comments of a visiting uncle of the host family:

> When you were born you did not know you would come to Kenya, but God knew. It was God's wish that you should come. You must write this down somewhere that you have come here. You must tell your child that you were here. At one time there

> was a bar between African people and white people, but God has broken down that bar; now we are one. If I put my blood in this cup, and then put yours in, would there be any difference? No. We are the same now.

Of an encounter with a child:

> Peter is great! About two feet high in knee-high, blue rubber boots, baggy flower shorts, a shirt that extends four inches below a purple, green and orange knitted vest, and a red and white baseball cap showing a big-eyed, chubby cheeked, always grinning face. He stares shyly at first, grinning from side-to-side; then, belly-button first, he steps forward and presents his hand to me. All day he appears, from behind trees, around walls, entering rooms, catching my eye and grinning. Last night he walked up, sheer determination in his always-laughing eyes, and ran his small black hand down my white arm. He looked at his hand, grinned, and ran out of the room. This morning he investigated my glasses, bringing laughter from everybody around me.

The difficulties and opportunities of encounter with a radically different culture throws one back hard on one's own resources. The better informed our students are about the tensions and joys they are likely to experience, the better their experience will be. "Sink or swim" is not an approach appropriate for foreign study, especially in Asia or Africa. Experience with reentry clearly suggests that a person forewarned about the difficulties of reentry will move through that process in a much more healthy fashion. Likewise, with culture shock . . . the better prepared a student is, the more healthy, informed and sensitive that student's experience will be.

Preparation for countries in Asia and Africa needs to be done carefully and sensitively if for no other reason than that American visitors to Asia and Africa are rare. They are not used to us. We are best served to be best prepared to meet them.